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SUBJECT: LEBEDKO EXPLAINS HIS OPPOSITION TO MILINKEVICH

Classified By: Ambassador George Krol for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a May 23 meeting with Ambassador, Belarusian opposition figure and United Civic Party (UCP) chairman Anatoliy Lebedko discussed his recent visit to Washington, points of disagreement within the opposition coalition and commented on Russian-Belarusian relations. Lebedko is pushing for the coalition to develop a concrete "plan of action" and supports holding a congress of the democratic coalition to confirm the coalition's strategy. Lebedko acknowledged his positions put him at odds with coalition leader Milinkevich, but he downplayed their differences as more form than substance. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Lebedko described his recent meetings in Washington with Washington officials at State, NSC, OVP and on the Hill as interesting and useful. He was particularly pleased to hear the USG is pushing hard to place Belarus on the agenda of the upcoming G-8 summit in St. Petersburg.

First Chat with Milinkevich

¶3. (C) Turning to relations within the democratic opposition, Lebedko noted that the day before he had his first one-on-one long discussion with coalition presidential contender Aleksandr Milinkevich. He acknowledged they did not manage to resolve all their differences, especially over the coalition's future strategy, but he downplayed their disagreements as more form than substance. He commented that the coalition needs to open up and accommodate the new people who emerged in support of change after the March 19 elections, including finding a way to work with presidential contender Aleksandr Kozulin and his people. Lebedko contended Milinkevich and Kozulin were splitting the same pro-democratic segment of the country.

Coalition Strategy Needs Action Plan

¶4. (C) Lebedko noted his party had abstained from voting on the coalition strategy presented and discussed by the coalition governing council the day before (note: the UCP was the only coalition member not to endorse the strategy). Lebedko claimed his party's rules dictate that the party's governing council had to discuss and review any document before endorsing it. He implied this would take a little time but he clearly noted his main problem with the proposed strategy (which he claimed had been authored by BNF chairman Vyachorka) is its lack of a concrete "plan of action."

Lebedko maintained an action plan is crucial to move the coalition beyond words and rhetoric to keep the interest and the support of the new people who want to take action to promote change and not simply talk about change. Elaborating on the action plan, Lebedko maintained it must contain proposals specific to each region of Belarus. He indicated the UCP is actively formulating this plan.

Needed: A Congress and National Committee

¶15. (C) Lebedko argued the coalition should hold another congress comprised of the already elected members as well as the new people and Kozulin's people to show greater unity and bless formally the strategy and action plan. Noting some coalition members argue a congress could have a destructive effect on coalition unity, Lebedko was adamant it would not as long as personal political ambitions are contained.

¶16. (C) Lebedko worried that the opposition was becoming too pre-occupied with word games, such as whether to call itself a movement or a campaign. He also complained that too many look through what Lebedko called the "prism of Milinkevich." He contended the national committee created by the coalition during the campaign (which he headed) needed to be preserved, and actively engaged with the people. For this reason he believes the committee should have its own web-site separate from any party and keep people informed of coalition stances as well as answer questions from interested citizens on coalition policies. Breaking the information vacuum and the government's propaganda monopoly would have to be a key part of the coalition action plan.

¶17. (C) On Russia, Lebedko expressed deep concern Moscow may be undertaking strong efforts to absorb Belarus. Preventing this had to be a part of the coalition's action plan. He hoped the outside world could help by raising Belarus at the G-8 summit in St Petersburg and giving Russia a sharp warning.

Dispelling Rumors

¶18. (C) Ambassador told Lebedko frankly that some European countries present at the Vilnius CDC conference expressed concern over undisguised Lithuanian efforts to promote Lebedko against Milinkevich, and this could hurt Lebedko's and the coalition's image in Europe. Ambassador also noted rumors circulating that the USG supports Lebedko against Milinkevich. Ambassador reiterated to Lebedko that the USG encourages a united democratic opposition in Belarus and is not picking favorites. Lebedko expressed gratitude for the Ambassador's frankness, claiming he had heard such rumors himself. As for his image in Europe, he hopes to deal with that when he travels to Germany next week.

Lebedko Reelected As Chairman

¶19. (U) On May 28, the UCP reelected Lebedko as its chairman during the party's tenth convention. Lebedko was supported by 138 of the 164 delegates. Vladimir Chervonenko, the chairman of the UCP regional organization in Grodno, and Igor Shinkarik, chairman of the Minsk city organization, were elected deputy chairpersons. Lyudmila Gryaznova and Yaroslav Romanchuk were reelected as deputy chairpersons.

¶10. (U) The UCP also adopted a resolution calling for a second Congress of Democratic Forces to discuss the recent presidential campaign and to define the opposition's strategy for the post-election period. Lebedko suggested that Kozulin's supporters and those who demonstrated in October Square should participate in the congress.

¶11. (U) The convention also voted to increase efforts to

delegitimize Lukashenko's government. These efforts would include a campaign called "Solidarity for Freedom" to pressure the government to release all political prisoners, inform the public about the human rights situation in Belarus, and bring the regime before an international tribunal.

Comment

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Lebedko claimed he has no intention of splitting the coalition and only wants to strengthen it. It is clear, however he thinks Milinkevich is less action oriented than he would like and acknowledges Milinkevich only as a leader but not the leader of the democratic opposition. It is a good sign he and Milinkevich agreed they needed to have more one-on-one discussions together as they had this week. They will probably never see eye to eye but perhaps can recognize the benefit of maintaining at least to the outside world and to the Lukashenko regime a united front.

Krol